



CAPITOL TIDBITS

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4th Legislative District

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We've had a busy week in Olympia, with a major Legislative cutoff coming up. Here is the latest update from Olympia.

STATEWIDE DROUGHT EMERGENCY DECLARED

On March 10, Governor Gregoire declared a statewide drought emergency and asked the Washington National Guard to prepare for combating wildfires. What triggers a drought emergency? The River Forecast Center for the Columbia Basin issues a river flow forecast for April through September. Certain actions follow certain forecasts. The latest forecast is at the level to trigger voluntary conservation and is only slightly above the measurement that would trigger the loss of some water rights. Because of our dry winter, drought conditions are expected to be worse than in 1977. In some places, rainfall has only reached 15 percent of average and the state's mountain snowpack is only 26 percent of average. During a drought declaration, the Department of Ecology focuses on maintaining crucial energy supplies; aiding agriculture; protecting public water supplies; safeguarding stream flows for fish; and preparing to fight forest fires.

SUPREME COURT HEARS ARGUMENTS ON DEFENSE OF MARRIAGE ACT

On March 8, the Washington State Supreme Court heard oral arguments regarding the constitutionality of Washington's Defense of Marriage Act approved in 1998. This law defines marriage as a union between one man and one woman and does not allow persons of the same gender to marry. Supporters argued the children are best served in a traditional family with a mother and father. Thousands of people gathered in front of the Temple of Justice in support of traditional marriage. The Court's decision is not expected until late spring.

ELECTION CHALLENGE UPDATE

On March 3, the state Republican Party released the names of 1,135 felons and 45 dead people who illegally cast ballots in the contested 2004 governor's race. On March 8, working from an earlier list of 105 names of possible felons who voted illegally generated by the *Seattle Times*, King County Prosecutor Norm Maleng confirmed 99 voted without having their civil rights restored and said he'll move to revoke their voter registrations. Felons can be convicted of voting illegally, but Maleng said it may be hard to prove they did so knowingly. Still, the results of his investigation can become part of the factual record in the election challenge before Judge Bridges. Maleng said he will now investigate the new list supplied by the state Republican Party. Nearly 900 on that list are from King County. With only a 129-vote margin for Gregoire out of nearly 2.9 million votes cast statewide, the number of illegal votes identified is significant. Judge Bridges has not yet set a trial date.

SENATE APPROVES PRESCRIPTION DRUG ASSISTANCE FOUNDATION

Drug manufacturers offer free or low-cost drugs to those otherwise unable to afford them. The application processes for these programs vary and often people have to apply multiple times over the course of a year and wait until their application is processed before returning to their doctor for the medication. **Senate Bill 5558** creates a nonprofit foundation to assist low-income uninsured individuals in obtaining free or low-cost prescription drugs. Such foundations have been successful in other states. This measure is now before the House of Representatives.

DEMOCRATS CLEAR THE WAY TO RAISE TAXES BY MOVING BILL TO GUT I-601 OUT OF COMMITTEE

Democrats said this week they expect to raise taxes, apparently rejecting the Republican-backed “priorities in government” process to balance the budget within current revenues. To clear the way for raising taxes, Senate Democrats on the Ways & Means Committee gave approval to **Senate Bill 6078**. This measure allows the Legislature to approve tax increases by a simple majority vote – instead of the two-thirds required under Initiative 601. The measure also switches the base for calculating allowable spending growth from a factor of population growth plus inflation to a personal income growth factor – a switch that allows spending to grow faster and higher.

SENATE APPROVES BILL GIVING VICTIMS OF RAPE A SECOND CHANCE AT JUSTICE

Except for murder and crimes like arson that result in someone’s death, there is a time limit in law for filing charges. Rape is one of those crimes for which there is a “statute of limitations.” I sponsored **Senate Bill 5042**, which changes that provision so that suspects of felony sex crimes can be charged for up to one year after DNA evidence has become available. This change in law was first adopted in California after a man was charged with rape and his DNA evidence identified him as the offender in an earlier rape. However, he could not be charged with the earlier rape because the statute of limitations on that crime had expired. This measure is now before the House of Representatives and I will work with my colleagues in the House to get it passed.

NEW LAW REQUIRES HEALTH PLANS TO EQUALLY COVER MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Governor signed a new law to require equal insurance coverage for mental and physical illnesses. The measure will eventually cost the state about \$8 million a year in extra coverage for state employees and low-income enrollees in the state’s Basic Health Plan. It will also increase premiums for many Washington residents, from one to five percent. However, the new law won’t be fully implemented until July 2010. The mandate does not apply to businesses with 50 or fewer employees, self-insured companies or individual health care plans. Supporters of the new law say mental health coverage and treatment will eventually save the state and businesses money by reducing absenteeism, crime and other problems caused by untreated mental illness. (**House Bill 1154**)